

## There's No Place for Poison in the Kingdom of Heaven

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew takes us deeper into the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has described the blessings that the Father promises to shower over the disadvantaged and the virtuous in Heaven. He has assured the people who came to him seeking healing, food, and hope that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He has affirmed that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. It's all very beautiful and comforting. Today, though, we learn that Jesus also came to explain God's law in ways that might make some of us very, very uncomfortable.

In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses urged his people to choose a life of peace and prosperity by diligently obeying the 613 תרי"ג מצוות (*taryag mizvot*), or sacred commandments, found in the Torah. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus focuses on four of those commandments: the prohibition of murder, the prohibition of adultery, the rules for divorce, and the prohibition of false witness. In every case, Jesus elevates the requirements of sacred law by several orders of magnitude. It's not enough just to refrain from actual murder; Jesus tells his followers to put aside anger and resolve conflict at every turn. It's not enough just to refrain from physical adultery; Jesus insists that even looking at a woman with desire is wrong and urges his followers to dismember themselves before falling into sin. It's not enough to divorce according to the process given through Moses; Jesus asserts that almost any divorce violates the prohibition of adultery. And it's not enough just to refrain from swearing falsely; Jesus declares that making any promise more elaborate than "yes or no" is flirting with the Adversary. Our reading cuts off before Jesus tells his followers to turn the other cheek, love their enemies and be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect, but we might still think his interpretation of sacred law is unreasonably strict.

We can't know how the crowd reacted to Jesus's interpretation of God's commandments, but we do know how many of us react in today's sophisticated, post-modern era. If sacred law demands too much, we just laugh it off. Take adultery, for example. You may remember how, in 1976, former President Jimmy Carter admitted in a *Playboy* interview that he had "committed adultery in [his] heart." Comedians and the press turned Carter's admission into a lingering joke that undermined his *gravitas* for a very long time. It took decades of humanitarian work and a Nobel Peace Prize to fully restore that very decent man's public standing. We might not be so quick to laugh off murder or perjury, but it's tempting to conclude that Jesus was indulging in a little hyperbole when he told his followers to tear out their eyes or lop off their hands over the odd naughty thought or minor indiscretion. Come now, Jesus. That's going a bit too far.

But before we dismiss our Lord's interpretation of sacred law, it's worth taking a careful look at the examples he chose. Let's assume for the sake of discussion that we Gentiles aren't bound by the Torah's 613 *mizvot*. Our Book of Common Prayer tells us that we *are* bound by the Ten Commandments. Of those ten, four focus on our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods, we are to make no idols, we are not to take God's name in vain, and we are to keep the Sabbath. Those four commandments, especially the one about idols, were constant sore spots in Adonai's often contentious relationship with his chosen people. If Jesus were simply asking his followers for deeper piety, we might expect him to emphasize those commandments, but he doesn't. Instead, Jesus hones in on the sacred laws that address some of the most sensitive and potentially painful ways we treat – and often mistreat – one another.

Actual murder is relatively rare even in a society like ours that has grown numb to mass shootings, but anger is something else again. According to Gallup pollsters, worry, stress, sadness, and anger set new worldwide records in 2020, and that was before the pandemic, which

made everything worse. Criminologist Scott A. Bond argues that fear-based anger is the primary motive for violence, so anger can have serious, even fatal, consequences. As for adultery, it doesn't just lead to divorce. A recent study reported in *Women's Health* found that "violence was acutely triggered by accusations of infidelity, typically within the context of alcohol or drug use." The cruel or casual rejection of a spouse contaminates the love that once inspired a marriage. False promises sour relationships and destroy trust. By focusing on the sacred laws that prohibit violence and broken promises, Jesus goes straight to the heart of how we fallen humans too often do each other harm.

Some Bible scholars argue that Jesus took an extreme stance on sacred law so that his followers, realizing that they couldn't possibly meet God's standards on their own, would turn to Adonai and beg for mercy. I believe that Jesus sometimes asks us to do very difficult things, but they're nonetheless achievable if we accept divine help. In this morning's Gospel, Jesus instructs his followers, then and now, to resist the emotions and impulses that make us harm one another. I believe that Jesus also asks us to recognize that anger, hatred, resentment, envy, lust, cruelty, and dishonesty hurt us every bit as badly as they hurt the people upon whom we inflict them. If you're skeptical, think back to an occasion when you were so angry with someone that you couldn't easily let it go. If that memory tightens your throat and churns your stomach, you see my point. Dark emotions poison us if we hang onto them for too long.

Righteous anger has its place; we might never have achieved some of our greatest social justice victories without it. But victories built by human hands are fragile, and evil is resilient. We've seen in recent years how quickly hatred and prejudice reassert themselves just when we think fundamental decency has triumphed at last. We can and must work to make our broken world a better, fairer place. But we must also recognize that we can't transform the world into

what it should be by ourselves. If this world is truly to be the Kingdom of Heaven where God's will reigns supreme, we're going to need God's help to make it so.

As we consider just how willing we really are to step up to Jesus's expectations, it helps to remember that our Lord isn't preparing us for this world; he's preparing us for the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus probably doesn't want us showing up with missing eyes and hands, but I think he *does* want us to take God's commandments seriously and to make a real effort to satisfy not just the letter of sacred law, but its divine spirit. That brings us to the Holy Spirit, whose fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Sacred law requires us to cultivate those fruits in ourselves through the Holy Spirit's grace. We won't always succeed because we're human, but Jesus expects us to try because we're his.

It's been said that holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting your enemy to die. Dark emotions are poison, and poison has no place in the Kingdom of Heaven. As the Son of God, Jesus is in a unique position to explain what God means by each of the commandments. His explanation sets a high bar, but his love helps us reach it. With practice and divine grace, we can learn to live into both the letter and the spirit of sacred law, becoming spiritually healthier and more fit to live peaceful lives in God's kingdom. My prayer is that each of us will choose to obey God's sacred laws and to do the hard, satisfying work of cultivating the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our souls. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near; with his help, we can become worthy to live there. *Amen.*